

Nicholas Oldisworth (1611-1645) and the Westminster School Poets

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Westminster School's seventeenth century record as a nursery of poets will probably never be equalled. Its major luminaries are Jonson, Herbert and Dryden. A little further down the scale are Cowley, Randolph, Alabaster, Strode, Corbett, Cartwright, Henry King, and George Fletcher, followed by the lesser lights of Martin Llyellen, Jasper Mayne, George Morely, Brian Duppa, and, I would like to add, Cardell Goodman and Nicholas Oldisworth. The importance of the School has been noted by Crum, Anselment and Marotti, amongst others, but we can get a better understanding of how the poetic community worked from the evidence provided by Nicholas Oldisworth.

The Oxford Matriculation records describe Nicholas Oldisworth as the son of Robert Oldisworth of Coln Rogers in Gloucestershire. No mention is made of his mother, Merial, the daughter of Sir Nicholas Overbury and the sister of the ill-fated Sir Thomas. Yet it is the poet's maternal inheritance that features most strongly in his life. This is underlined by the fact that he was born at the home of his grandfather, Sir Nicholas Overbury, at Bourton-on-the-Hill, and baptised in the parish church on 14 July 1611. In 1635 the living of the same church was presented to him by Sir Nicholas.

As a member of Christ Church from 1628, Nicholas Oldisworth was at the centre of the poetic community that dominated Caroline Oxford. The record of his participation in the activities of that community is what one would expect: a few poems in University commemorative volumes, others scattered through various manuscript miscellanies, and a poem in one of the nostalgic post-Restoration volumes associated with Smith and Mennes. Less characteristic is a series of forty-two unattributed poems in one Oxford-related miscellany, Folger MS V.a.170. Even more surprising is Bodleian MS Don. c. 24, a collection of his early poems in an autograph fair-copy manuscript for presentation to his wife. The manuscript, entitled 'A Recollection of Certain Scattered Poems', was completed in 1645, three weeks before Oldisworth's death from the plague.

Seventeenth-century holograph fair-copy collections rarely survive, and there

is certainly nothing else like MS Don.c.24 associated with Oxford and Christ Church poets, except perhaps for Cardell Goodman's 'Beauty in Raggs' (Lambeth MS 937 and MS 1063). Simply as a physical object the manuscript is valuable, since it provides us with a sense of what many poets might have presented to the printing-house, though I have my doubts about this; more importantly, it gives us a very clear indication of the continuing and complex tradition of manuscript publication, one that seems to avoid print. Because of Oldisworth's self-consciousness, this collection of about one hundred and twenty poems detaches itself from the anonymity of the typical manuscript miscellany and engages with a coherent and recognisable personal history.

Caroline Oxford produced a great deal of English verse, much of it in forms that challenge our own reading practices. Although a small quantity was printed, the rest remained in manuscript, but rarely in the form of authorial working papers or fair copies. The poems made their way into manuscript miscellanies, collections which reflect the taste or the standing in the cultural-commodity hierarchy of the owner or owners of the volumes. As frequently as poems were attributed, often incorrectly, to prestigious writers such as Donne, Jonson, Carew, Strode or Corbett, so many were transcribed anonymously. Very little is known about the personal and social activity which gave rise to these collections and their unknown owners, though the pioneering work of Peter Beal, Mary Hobbs and Harold Love on the process of circulation has revealed an important new field of study (see also Marotti).

As well as producing a great many manuscript collections of verse, Caroline Oxford, and Christ Church in particular, was a great nursery of poets. Occasionally individuals like Martin Llyellen would publish small volumes of poems. Posthumous collections by reputed figures such as Carew, Corbett or Cartwright emerged from the press. Much later, the volumes associated with Sir John Mennes and James Smith would make available in print collections akin to the manuscript miscellanies. These are exceptional cases. Contributors to the manuscript miscellany stock were far more likely to have their work appear in print if they contributed to any one of the series of University commemorative volumes produced with particular frequency during the years of Charles I's personal rule. These volumes, which allowed writers to display their loyalty and their collegiate affiliation, constituted an innovation in the literary life of the University and are perhaps the best evidence we have of a very distinct poetic community.

The twenty-one volumes of commemorative verse published in Oxford between 1600 and 1633 contain only two poems in English. Convention required poems in the learned languages: Latin, Greek and Hebrew. Earlier volumes occasionally also have poems in French. The first volume in Charles's reign, *Britanniae natalis* (1630), celebrating the birth of the future Charles II, followed this tradition, with 144 poems in Latin, three in Greek and three in French, but in

the volume celebrating the King's recovery from what was thought to be smallpox, *Musarum Oxoniensium pro rege suo soteria* (1633), there are four poems in English: one by Jasper Mayne in the first half of the book (sig. 2§4-2§4^v), and a group of three by William Cartwright, Jeremial Terrent and Thomas Lockey respectively towards the end (sigs. G3-G4). In addition to the four published poems, there is one which did not make its way into the volume. It is by Nicholas Oldisworth (see p. 64 below).

The writers of the vernacular poems offer an explanation for the departure from convention, and we should be prepared to accept their profession that they wished to acknowledge the presence of Henrietta-Maria, who knew neither Latin nor Greek, and definitely no Hebrew, and this would indicate that Royalist Oxford had begun to take into account the increased domesticity and intimacy of the royal couple (Sharpe 171). Certainly, there could be no better way of simultaneously affirming loyalty by naturalising a foreign consort, and disarming hostile criticism of the monarchy. But these are the benefits and rationalisations of hindsight, though they are confirmed by similar developments at Cambridge.

Homogeneously grouped poems such as these are not, however, serendipitous effusions of a single occasion. We need to understand the conditions which enabled their production. All five writers were members of Christ Church, but more important, all had been educated at Westminster School. From Westminster many boys proceeded as King's Scholars to either Christ Church or Trinity College, Cambridge. In terms of the Elizabethan statutes each of these colleges was required to elect four Scholars a year, but in practice only Christ Church did so on a regular basis. Westmonastrians preferred Oxford, for one very obvious reason. King's Scholars at Trinity were treated as undergraduates and had to earn their election as Fellows of the College. At Christ Church a King's Scholar was automatically one of the one hundred Students; in other words, he had the status of a fellow and under normal circumstances would retain it until he resigned. King's Scholars could therefore stay on at Christ Church for much longer than the three or four years it would take them to complete a first degree. Nicholas Oldisworth, for example, was still participating in College activities in 1636, four years after his BA and a year after he became Rector of Bourton-on-the-Hill. Only at Christmas 1641 was he left out of the Buttery Book, because as a married man he could no longer hold a Studentship.

A Westminster boy arriving at Christ Church would not find himself amongst strangers. As well as his three or four contemporaries from the School, he would find schoolfellows from three or four previous elections and Westmonastrians from previous generations. In particular, between 1596 and 1650 he would discover that six successive Deans (Thomas Ravis, John King, William Goodwin, Richard Corbett, Brain Duppa and Samuel Fell) had been to the School. (For the same period, not a single Master of Trinity had been at Westminster.) The new Student would also know a great deal about the College beforehand. All four

Headmasters from 1598 to 1695 were King's Scholars elected to Christ Church.

In 1628 Nicholas Oldisworth arrived at Christ Church in the company of William Cartwright. Already there he would have found Richard Corbett (the Dean, soon to be succeeded by Brian Duppa), William Strode, Zouch Townley (Ben Jonson's friend), George Morley, Gervase Warmestry, William Hemmings, Thomas Mottershed, Jeremial Terrent, Jasper Mayne, Thomas Browne, John Donne (the younger) and Thomas Manne. Robert Randolph was to follow in 1629, and Thomas Weaver and Richard West four years later. All of them had been shaped by the same educational and cultural ideals, and so poetic activity was not something external to who they were. For them, writing poems was not an accomplishment they could occasionally lapse into, but a way of constituting their identities. Collecting poems was not simply a fashionable hobby, but a means of acquiring and displaying the cultural capital which established their identities as learned wits. Oldisworth could move effortlessly into this milieu with its well-established traditions and practices, one which provided him with models such as Corbett, mentors such as Brian Duppa (the friend of John Donne and Henry King) and rivals for the attention of the community like William Cartwright. It is therefore not surprising to find amongst his writings a long journey-poem, 'Iter Australe', to match Corbett's famous *Iter Boreale*; or part of a verse translation of Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusai* made for Brian Duppa.

The case of Nicholas Oldisworth suggests that the enabling conditions for a poetic community are a locale, a number of dominant individuals and some form of structure or procedure which ensures the continuity of the community. Some of the dominant individuals deserve more attention. The most important of these is Ben Jonson, whose presence, for Oldisworth at least, is a source of inspiration and anxiety. By placing the lengthy 'A Letter to Ben. Johnson. 1629' at the very beginning of 'A Recollection of Certaine Scattered Poems', Oldisworth signals where his poetic allegiances lie. The hyperbolic irony with which verse paragraphs begin with a demand for Jonson's death clearly prefigures post-Romantic anxieties about the disabling influences of dominant predecessors, and because Oldisworth conflates the author with his work, he may also be seen as anticipating, quite literally, belated theoretical debates about the Death of the Author.

Die Johnson: crosse not our Religion so,
As to bee thought immortall. Lett us know
Thou art a Man. Thy workes make us mistake
Thy person; and thy great Creations make
Us idol thee, and 'cause wee see thee doe
Eternall things, thinke Thee eternall too.

Restore us to our Faith, and die. Thy doome
Will doe as much good, as the Fall of Rome,

'Twill crush an Heresie: wee n'er must hope
For truth, till two bee gone, Thou and the Pope: 10
And though wee are in danger, by thy Fall,
To loose our Witts, our Judgements (brains and all)
Wee are content thou shouldst besott us thus.
Better bee fooles, then superstitious.

Having expressed his reverence for Jonson, Oldisworth turns to the elder poet's qualities which sustained that esteem. The first of these is Jonson's naturalisation of classical learning in the vernacular.

Die: to what Ende should wee thee now adore? 15
There is not Scholarship to reach to more.
Our Language is refin'd: professors doubt
Their Greeke and Hebrew shall bee both putt out;
And wee, that Latine studyed have so long,
Shall now dispute, and write, in Johnson's tongue. 20
Nay, courtiers yeeld: and every beauteous wench

Had rather speake thy English, then her French.
 And for our Mater! Nature stands agast,
 Wondring to see her strength thus best at last;
 Invention stoppes her course, and bids the World 25
 Looke for noe more: shee hath already hurld
 Her treasure all on one. Thou hast out-done
 So much our Wish and Expectation,
 That were it not for Thee, wee scarce had known
 Fancie it selfe could ere so farre have gone. 30
 Give lit'rature (a While) Leave to admire
 How shee gott so high: shee can gett noe higher.

Oldisworth then returns to his concern with Jonson's longevity, but this time to contribute to the chorus of advice from Jonson's admirers after the poet's rancorous response to the failure of *The New Inn* in 1629.

Die: seemes it not enough, thy Writing's date
 Is endlesse, but thine owne prolonged Fate
 Must equall it? For shame, engrosse not Age, 35
 But now, thy fifth Act's ended, leave the stage,
 And lett us clappe. Wee know, the Stars, which doe
 Give others one Life, give a Laureat two:
 But thou, if thus thy Bodie long survives,
 Hast two Eternities, and not two Lives. 40
 Die, for thine owne sake. Seest thou not, thy Praise
 Is shortned meerly by this length of dayes?
 Men may talke this, and that: to part the strife,
 If I may judge, thou hast noe fault, but Life.
 Cold authors please best. Mee thinks, thy warm Breath 45
 Casts a thicke Mist before thy Worth: which, Death
 Would quickly dissipate. If thou wouldst have
 Thy baies to flourish, plant them on thy Grave.
 Gold now is drosse, and Oracles are stuffe
 With us: for why? thou art not low enough, 50
 Wee still looke under thee: stoope, and submitt
 Thy glorie to the Meanesse of our Witt.
 The Rhodian colossus, ere it fell,

Could not bee scann'd nor measur'd halfe so well.
Art's length, Art's depth, Art's heighth can n'er be found, 55
Till thou art prostrate layd upon the ground.
Learning noe farther than thy Life extends:
With thee beganne all Art, with Thee it endes.

Oldisworth ensures that the poem closes on a complimentary note, but the warning on the dangers of superannuation are unmistakable. In 1632 he returned to this concern when he placed at the beginning of a journey poem, 'Iter Australe', an account of an encounter with the aging laureate:

Behind the Abbey lives a man of fame;
With awe and reverence wee repeat his name,
Ben Johnson: him wee saw, and thought to heare
From him some Flashes and fantastique Guere;
But hee spake nothing lesse. His whole Discourse
Was how Mankinde grew daily worse and worse,
How god was disregarded, how Men went
Downe even to Hell, and never did repent,
With many such sadd Tales; as hee would teach
Us Scholars, how herafter Wee should preach.
Great wearer of the baies, looke to thy lines,
Lest they chance to bee challeng'd by Divines:
Sure future Times will, by a grosse Mistake,
Johnson a Bishop, not a Poët make.

(Bodleian MS, fol. 45)

Jonson and his contemporaries clearly understood the nature of the poem as a compliment to the aging laureate. Jonson sent a copy of the poem, along with poems by Lucius Carey, Viscount Falkland, and one R. Goodwin, to the Earl of Newcastle in 1635:

I have obeyed your commands, and sent you a packet of mine own praises, which I should not have done if I had any stock of modesty in store. But obedience is better sacrifice, and you commanded it. I am now like an old bankrupt in wit that am driven to pay my debts on my friends' credits; and for want of satisfying letters to subscribe to bills of exchange. (Jonson 1: 201)

The poem is also the most frequently copied piece by Oldisworth. In addition to British Library Newcastle MS (fol. 185), the poem is found in Bodleian MSS

Ashmole 47 (fols.107-108^v), Firth e. 4 (pp.104-5), and Eng. Poet. e. 97 (pp.147-8), Folger MS V.a.322 (pp.76-8), Huntington MS HM 198 Part 1 (pp.121-3) and in *Wit Restor'd* (1658; Mennes and Smith 79-81).

Oldisworth was educated at Westminster College under Lambert Osbaldeston, one of a series of headmasters who encouraged poetic composition in the vernacular (Anselment 185). Both Westminster and Christ Church had long been centres of excellent classical education and of royalist opinion, and it would be surprising if their members had not contributed to conventional congratulatory volumes. But ever since the days of William Camden's headmastership, the school also had an unequalled reputation for encouraging verse in English. Camden's most famous pupil was Ben Jonson, but he also taught Richard Corbett. During Richard Ireland's term of office, from 1598 to 1610, Henry King and George Herbert passed through the school. His successor, John Wilson (1610 to 1622) saw the rise of lesser talents such as those of George Morely, William Strode and Jasper Mayne. Lambert Osbaldeston, who was Headmaster from 1622 until 1639, influenced the generation whose poems dominate the Oxford collections of the 1620s and 1630s. The better known poets of this generation were Thomas Randolph, William Cartwright and Abraham Cowley. Randolph and Cowley did not proceed to Christ Church, but to Trinity College, Cambridge, and thus provide a very good control for the Oxford group's activities – not being subjected to the nurturing, hothouse privileges of their Oxford contemporaries, they soon ventured into print. Osbaldeston's successor, Richard Busby, the school's most famous Headmaster (and flogger), taught at least one great poet during his fifty-six year reign, John Dryden.

Lambert Osbaldeston (1594-1659), like so many of the Headmasters of Westminster, was educated at the School and Christ Church. Initially he was granted a joint patent as Headmaster with John Wilson in late 1621. This was because Wilson's leanings towards Rome made him suspect. The appointment of Osbaldeston was probably made under the influence of John Williams who had been appointed Dean of Westminster in 1620 and Lord Keeper and Bishop of Lincoln in the following year. In 1626 the patent of Headmaster was renewed to Osbaldeston alone, once more with Williams's support. Osbaldeston's loyalty to Williams proved his undoing when Archbishop Laud, an inveterate enemy of his brother prelate, turned his malice on the bishop's supporters. After various accusations against Osbaldeston failed, Laud finally in 1638 succeeded in bringing the Headmaster to trial in the Star Chamber on a libel charge as a way of venting his animosity against Williams. There is serious doubt as to the soundness of the charges (Sargeaunt 67-68), but Osbaldeston was sentenced to two fines of £5000, to deprivation of his spiritual dignities, to imprisonment at the King's pleasure and to having one ear nailed to the pillory in the Palace Yard and the other in Dean's Yard in the presence of his scholars. Osbaldeston

destroyed his papers and went into hiding before this barbarous sentence could be carried out, and his place as Headmaster was taken by Busby. It is a tribute to him that he survived Laud largely because he was protected by his former pupils.

Osbaldeston enjoyed the reputation of being a good and demanding schoolmaster, but it is clear that in the process he did much to encourage the high spirits of his pupils. In a verse epistle to his cousin by marriage, Susan Oldisworth, Oldisworth provides a lyrical account of his first day at Westminster. Oldisworth's years there were obviously both happy and profitable.

Foure yeares agoe, when I to schoole did packe
Holding my Learning fast all on my backe,
It pleasd king Osbalston to lett us play
Noe lesse, then for the date of one whole day
O peaceful empire! Sure Augustus blisse
Was but an idle prophecie of this.
Tell mee, thou Sunne, who now didst shine more deare
Then any other parcell of the Yeare,
Tell me what solid Joy, what pure Delight,
Two sweete, though yong Friends had then in thy sight.¹

The benign influence of the Headmaster should be seen not only in such an effusion of well-being, but also in his pupil's ability and willingness to express it in verse. Oldisworth was not the only one who responded to such encouragement. The youthful Abraham Cowley pays the following tribute:

TO THE RIGHT WORSHIPFUL,
my very loving Master, Master LAMBERT
OSBOLSTON, chiefe Schoole-

master of *Westminster-*
Schoole

Sir,
My childish Muse is in her Spring: and yet
Can onely shew some budding of her Wit.
One frowne upon her Worke, (Learn'd Sir) from you:
Like some unkindere storme shot from your brow,
Would turne her *Spring*, to withering *Autumne's* time,
And make her *Blossomes* perish, ere their Prime.
But if you Smile, if in your gracious Eye
Shee an auspicious *Alpha* can descric.
How soone will they grow Fruit? How will they flourish
That had such beames their Infancie to nourish?
Which being sprung to ripenesse, expect then
The best, and first fruites, of her grateful Pen.
Your most dutifull Scholler,
Abraham Cowley²

Equally important are Osbaldeston's encouragement of his scholars after they left the school and their reciprocal willingness to acknowledge their indebtedness to him. Anthony Wood describes Osbaldeston as 'a person very fortunate in breeding up many wits' (Wood 3: 363), and we realise that this was not simply a matter of chance or of passing interest. Oldisworth's gloss to the poem which failed to be included in *Musarum Oxoniensium pro rege suo soteria* (1633) makes it clear that four years after he left school his former Headmaster ensured that the poem reached the King: 'These verses were presented to the king by Master Osbolston school-master and prebend of Westminster'. Osbaldeston was probably also instrumental in eliciting Oldisworth's epigram on the publication of Cowley's adolescent *Poetical Blossoms*:

On Abraham Cowley the
yong poët laureat.

Ben Johnson's wombe was great; and Wee
Did doubt, what might the issue bee:
But now hee brings forth to his praise,

And loe, an Infant crown'd with Baies.

(Bodleian MS, fol. 63v; see also Folger MS, p. 312)

If Oldisworth's testimony is seen to reflect as much upon himself as on Osbaldeston, we need turn only to the wayward Thomas Randolph, who a decade after leaving school, declares in a dedicatory poem to *The Jealous Lovers* (1632): 'si bene quid scripsi, tibi debeo' (sig. 2^r1).

At Christ Church Oldisworth would have known two Old Westmonastrians of an older generation: Richard Corbett, who was Dean from 1620 till 1628 when he became Bishop of Oxford (until 1632); and Brian Duppa, who was Dean from 1628 and Vice-Chancellor in 1632 and 1633. Corbett's reputation as a poet was well-established amongst his contemporaries. We cannot be sure that Oldisworth met Corbett, though it is clear that he thought of him as some kind of role model. Duppa, though not a regular producer of poems, took an active interest in poetry, and was responsible for the production in 1637 of *Jonsonius Virbius*, the collection of poems commemorating the death of Ben Jonson. There is ample evidence of Oldisworth's contact with him. In December 1631 Duppa required him to make a verse translation of Aristophanes' *The Ecclesiazusai*.³ At the request of Mrs. Duppa (Jane Killingtree) he wrote a censure of Aristophanes' derogatory view of women (Bodleian MS, fols. 32-33v).

Jane Duppa's intervention reminds us that the poetic community was not an exclusive 'in House' club which enables poetic activity, but occludes access to the uninitiated. Oldisworth writes a proxy poem for a contemporary in Christ Church to express his passion for young Master Henry Griesly, but also one to enable one Master Chandler of Coln Rogers to court his future wife, and one for Katherine Bacon (his best friend's sister) to vent her spleen at an unpleasant rival. He writes an epitaph for Thomas Hulbert, Clothier, at the request of Sir Edward Hungerford of Corsham, Wiltshire. One of his poems to Richard Bacon is appropriated and transformed in a collection of poems by the recipient's younger brother Matthew. In another, he compliments Mistress Strange of Summerford, a poetess, who had clearly shown her poems to a fellow writer. The obvious point is that the poetic community at Christ Church is not hermetic, but is simply the grounding of the poets' identities.

A poetic community requires more than a set of enabling structural conditions. One would also expect it to be marked by some commonly held beliefs or ideology. The traditions of Westminster School and Christ Church provided all of these. In general, most members of both institutions could be said to be Royalist, Anglican and anti-Puritanical. Because of the influence of John Williams as Dean of Westminster, they would however not all be supporters of William Laud. It is perhaps more important to realise that Westmonastrians at Christ Church formed the nucleus of a sustained and coherent social group which constituted itself

through poetic activity. The poems written and circulated were largely secular, occasional and personal, and very often concerned with events and people associated with the University, and their purpose was to display the learning, wit and urbanity of the writers and readers, often by 'Flashes and fantastique Guere' [*OED* 'Gear' sb 1: Apparel, attire, dress, vestments]. The sophistication aspired to could also be sexual, and it is therefore not surprising that certain poems by Donne and Carew feature prominently in the miscellanies. In short, everything aimed at establishing a self-understanding of the learned and high-mettled gentleman, loyal to his King and disdainful of hypocrites, Puritans and Dissenters. Although this ideal is clearly related to that of the cavalier, the University context alone ensures that it is distinct.

But there is a further ideological weighting to the poems produced, especially, but not only, by Oldisworth, and that is their involvement in the practices of private life (Strode provides another instance). A great many of the poems are about domestic and personal matters; or are the means of conducting private or intimate relationships, whether amatory, amicable or spiritual (often with a shared vocabulary, a common enough occurrence). Even public poems, such as those for royal occasions, invariably resort to gestures and tones of domestic conduct. Thus Henrietta Maria's anxieties for her husband's welfare and health are applauded: 'Queene Marie expressed marvailous true affection to the king, in the time of his sicknesse, though his disease was infectious.' (Bodleian MS, fol. 12) Jane (Killingtree) Duppa becomes part of the context of a translation from the Greek; and the *Te Deum* is translated at the behest of Godfrey Goodman, Bishop of Gloucester. The poems are not only about the domesticities and intimacies of private life, or become the means for conducting life of an intimate sphere, but the very process of writing, reading and circulation helps to constitute and reaffirm the commitment to private life. In other words, the poems are not intended for the indiscriminate scrutiny of print, and it would be a mistake to think of these poets as ones who failed to get into print. Rather, the poets chose the reservations of manuscript circulation as an affirmation of a way of life.

NOTES

1. Folger MS V. a. 170, p.273. The passage is omitted from the revised version in MS Don. c. 24, ff.26-7. I take Oldisworth's companion to be Richard Bacon who is referred to frequently in the poems. Bacon was elected a King's Scholar to Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1626, but left after a year for Douay, where in September 1628 he was said to be aged eighteen.
2. Cowley 1: 49. I have reversed roman and italic type and not distinguished small capitals.
3. MS Don. c. 24, f.32. Regrettably Oldisworth provides only 25 lines of his translation. He then adds in a gloss: 'The rest this being but a translation I have not here transcribed'. Oldisworth's translation is reprinted in *The Oxford Book of Classical Verse in Translation*.

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